

Nurse Author & Editor

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Top Ten Pet Peeves of Editors – A Survey of One

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Editors of nursing journals are busy people. Most have a regular day job in addition to their duties as editor of a nursing journal. Although I cannot speak for all editors, I do know from conversations, readings, and anecdotal reports that this list of pet peeves is fairly accurate. I'm not the first editor to construct such a list, and other editors may not rank their lists in exactly the same order, but chances are, most of these problems will be on every editor's list. Because this is a survey of one, and I am the one, I have ordered the list according to my own ranking, which is based on the amount of aggravation I feel and the frequency with which I experience the problem. On any given day, the order of this list may change based on what is sitting in my inbox.

1. Authors who do not follow the author guidelines. Editors spend a lot of time trying to provide good instructions to potential authors and when those guidelines are not followed, chances are high that the manuscript will be rejected. Electronic submission systems require authors follow very precise steps in the submission process to insure that the entire manuscript is visible to the editors and reviewers. Every journal has a reference style that readers have come to expect; when manuscripts do not comply with the format, the impression is that the article has not been targeted to the journal's audience. Statements about authorship, ethical conduct of research, conflicts of interest, and attribution of work are legal requirements for sending manuscripts out for peer review. Word limitations for print journals are not arbitrary – they exist because most journals have page limits due to the increasing costs of printing and distributing journals.

2. Articles that are clearly not written for the journal's audience. Professional journals have a mission statement and a clearly defined audience. Editors know what their readers like, read, and use and they try to communicate that to potential authors through the aims and scope on the journal home page or the association website. Even well-written and interesting articles are rejected when they are not crafted to reach a journal's target audience. It is also wise to refer to the professionals in the audience correctly, e.g., nurse practitioners not nurse practioners or non-physician providers.

3. Articles that include plagiarized material. Plagiarized text is easier to detect with the availability of electronic screening of manuscripts, although, it is still difficult to detect plagiarized ideas, figures, or images. Aside from the fact that plagiarism is an ethical and legal issue, dealing with questions of plagiarism is extraordinarily time consuming. The editors I know all consider it a serious responsibility to maintain the integrity of the scientific record, but to accomplish this task requires considerable effort.

4. Excessive use of quotations. Direct quotations can be an attempt to avoid plagiarism, but a manuscript that includes little besides direct quotes demonstrates that the author does not know how

to paraphrase, summarize, or synthesize. A series of quotes without the author's interpretation adds nothing to the scientific literature. The ability to paraphrase previously published material is evidence of the author's deep understanding of the state of the science, and too often that understanding is not evident in submitted manuscripts.

5. Inappropriate word choices. In an effort to sound scholarly, authors frequently attempt to find big words to impress an audience. Some of these choices result in what Fowler (1908) calls "malaprops." I have read some memorable phrases in manuscripts: "individuals inflicted with cancer..."; "masturbation is the first step in digestion"; "the patients demise is the inenviable step of palliative care." Inappropriate word choices may also signal an author's attempt to scramble a sentence so that it will not trigger a possible plagiarism flag.

6. Excessive wordiness. William Strunk, Jr. had it right back in 1918 and nothing has changed since: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell" (Section 3.13).

7. Poorly organized manuscripts. Readers expect authors to follow certain conventions in organizing an article. Distilled to its essence, "if the reader is to grasp what the writer means, the writer must understand what the reader needs" (Gopen & Swan, 1990). A few simple examples: The title should reflect the content and when it does not, readers are left expecting something more or wondering what they missed in the manuscript. Readers expect an introduction to introduce the topic and the context and a conclusion to bring everything together. In a research report, readers will be distracted by discussion material embedded in the analysis section or conclusions introduced ahead of hypotheses.

8. Duplicate submissions or redundant publications. These are two separate but related issues. Most journals have policies against the consideration of duplicate submissions (the simultaneous submission of the same article to more than one journal); if duplicate submission is uncovered, the author may be banned from future submission to any or all journals involved in the incident. It is good practice to include in a cover letter a statement that the submission is not under consideration by any other journal and that it has not been published in whole or in part previously. Redundant publication is generally not acceptable except in very select circumstances, e.g., publication of a complete report that follows a preliminary report or presentation at a conference. Comprehensive guidelines related to this topic can be found in the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to the Biomedical Journals published by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) available online at http://www.icmje.org/urm_main.html

9. Non-responsive or thoughtless authors. Early in my career as an editor I spent a lot of time providing extensive feedback to an author on her interesting but poorly written manuscript. Two excellent reviewers also provided helpful feedback to assist this author. The author never responded to the request for revisions and I subsequently saw the article published in another journal (one that has paid staff to rewrite poorly written articles) with all the revisions we had originally requested. For scholarly, peer-reviewed journals, it is not the job of editors or reviewers to rewrite an author's

manuscript. At best we try to provide helpful suggestions to improve the manuscript to enhance future reader's understanding and appreciation of the work.

10. Non-responsive or thoughtless reviewers. Most reviews are performed by unpaid volunteers and most editors try not to take advantage of the generosity of these volunteer reviewers. The usual procedure for securing reviews is to ask in advance if the reviewer is available and interested in performing a review on a specific manuscript. Not responding to an editor's query can cause significant delays in the review process. Reviewers who fail to disclose a possible conflict of interest or agree to perform a review and not complete the task can cause serious delays in the editorial process as new reviewers are solicited and assigned to the manuscript. Authors are the ones who suffer the most as they wait patiently for word on the acceptance of their manuscripts.

The Take Home Message

If you want to publish, target your message to a specific and appropriate audience, follow the author guidelines of the journal you select, revise and edit your work carefully, paraphrase and synthesize the state of the science as it relates to your work, give appropriate credit for the words and work of others, follow the journal's submission guidelines, and finally, respond to the editor's queries. If your work is rejected, don't give up but repeat this process for the next target journal. Don't try to save time by submitting to multiple journals at the same time and don't try to squeeze too many manuscripts out of one small piece of research. Once you are a published author, give back to the profession by acting as a conscientious and thoughtful reviewer.

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